

Your Family Tree: 13

BOARD OF GUARDIANS RECORDS

Poor Law records are the archives of the Boards of Guardians (PRONI ref **BG/**), the administrators of the Poor Law in Ireland, 1838-1948. PRONI holds extensive records for the 28 Poor Law Unions (each of which had a workhouse) that originally operated in the area now covered by Northern Ireland. In 1870, the Union of Gortin (**BG/28**) was amalgamated with that of Omagh (**BG/26**). Each Poor Law Union was named after a chief town in the district and usually serviced the area in a ten-mile radius, often extending across county boundaries. As well as workhouses, the Boards maintained infirmaries and fever hospitals. The system was financed by a rate set by the Poor Law Valuation.

The original aim of the poor law system was to provide relief to the destitute poor only if they entered the workhouse. Due to the demand for workhouse accommodation created as a result of the ravages of the Great Famine, outdoor relief was eventually introduced. This was granted to the able-bodied poor in the form of money or goods. As a result of the introduction of outdoor relief, the workhouses in Ireland had by 1900 become a refuge for the old, the sick and destitute children. The workhouse system lasted until the introduction of the Welfare State in 1948.

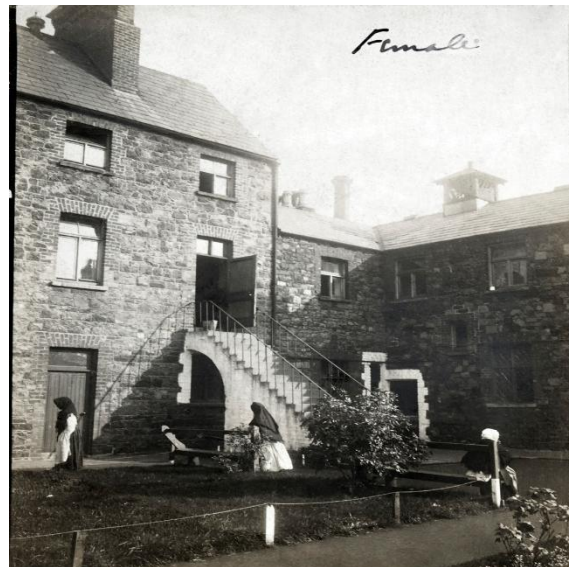


Image of Belfast Union Workhouse, female wing (1911).
PRONI Reference: D1898/1/40.

The Records

There are comprehensive sets of records covering the poor law unions that were established in the counties of Northern Ireland. However, the extent to which the records survive for each of these unions varies from place to place. Classes of records include:

- Minute books
- Indoor relief registers, later referred to as admission and discharge books
- Birth and death registers
- Outdoor relief registers
- Vaccination registers

Minute Books

There are complete sets of minute books for almost all the unions, and even those unions with imperfect sets lack only an occasional volume. These volumes are of less interest to genealogists as they largely contain minutes of the meetings of the various committees and a great deal of purely statistical information. However, the early volumes in particular will often contain the names of those individuals – for example of those who failed to comply with workhouse rules, who absconded or who were given assistance to emigrate by the Board of Guardians.

Registers

The **indoor relief registers** and admission and discharge registers list the name, age, religious denomination, marital status, former occupation and, if disabled, the nature of the disability, of those entering and leaving the workhouse. Occasionally, **registers of births and deaths** that occurred in the workhouse survive for some Poor Law Unions. There are also **outdoor relief registers** which are less extensive for the 19th century than the indoor relief registers. **Lists of inmates of the infirmaries and fever hospitals** attached to the workhouse may also have survived and these, too, can be very useful.

Another form of out-door relief was the practice of putting out to nurse or boarding out orphan and deserted children. Under Acts of 1898 and 1900 a record of children and nurses had to be kept. You will find details either in the out-door relief registers or in separate **boarding-out registers**.

The Medical Charities (Ireland) Act 1851 brought the dispensary system under the control of the Boards of Guardians which in turn created new series of records. These included vaccination registers that give the name of the child, the names and addresses of the mother or father or other person in charge of the child, the date of vaccination and the age of the child at the time of vaccination. Some of these registers date back to the 1860s for some Poor Law Unions. All of these records provide information that can be very useful to the genealogist, particularly as poorer people are less likely to be recorded elsewhere.

Example page from Board of Guardians Vaccination Register. PRONI Reference: BG/1/L/2.

Closure Periods

Due to the sensitive nature of some of the material contained within them, some records will be closed for 100 years from the latest date in each volume. This means that a register that contains information recorded in June 1907, will not be open to the public until January 2008 (the first working day in the year following their hundredth anniversary). Registers over 100 years old (where available) are open to the public. For specific enquiries in records less than a hundred years you should put your request in writing to the Records Management, Cataloguing and Access Section in PRONI (Access@communities-ni.gov.uk).

The Workhouse Unions

The 28 Poor Law Unions in the counties of Northern Ireland are listed below. For details of the records that have survived for each Union, researchers should consult the PRONI catalogue.

PRONI Reference	Poor Law Union
BG/1	Antrim, Co. Antrim
BG/2	Armagh, Co. Armagh
BG/3	Ballycastle, Co. Antrim
BG/4	Ballymena, Co. Antrim
BG/5	Ballymoney, Co. Antrim
BG/6	Banbridge, Co. Down
BG/7	Belfast, Cos Antrim and Down
BG/8	Castlederg, Co. Tyrone
BG/9	Clogher, Co. Tyrone
BG/10	Coleraine, Co. Derry/Londonderry
BG/11	Cookstown, Co. Tyrone
BG/12	Downpatrick, Co. Down
BG/13	Dungannon, Co. Tyrone
BG/14	Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh
BG/15	Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh
BG/16	Kilkeel, Co. Down
BG/17	Larne, Co. Antrim
BG/18	[Newton] Limavady, Co. Derry/Londonderry
BG/19	Lisburn, Co. Antrim
BG/20	Lisnaskea, Co. Fermanagh
BG/21	Londonderry/Derry, Co. Derry/Londonderry
BG/22	Lurgan, Co. Armagh
BG/23	Magherafelt, Co. Derry/Londonderry
BG/24	Newry, Co. Down
BG/25	Newtownards, Co. Down
BG/26	Omagh, Co. Tyrone
BG/27	Strabane, Co. Tyrone
BG/28	Gortin, Co. Tyrone (united to Omagh, c.1870)